



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge **Fire Management and Aviation**

Fire is an important part of the Okefenokee ecosystem. Disruption of the naturally occurring fire regime has resulted in major changes in upland and wetland habitats in the Okefenokee ecosystem. Although fire is essential for the restoration and management of the Okefenokee upland and wetland communities, remaining habitats and adjoining private property must be protected from uncontrolled, destructive wildfire. Even if all wildfires were allowed to burn, the landscape has become so fragmented there would not be enough natural fire to replace the natural fire regime.

Strategies proposed to use natural and prescribed fire to accomplish refuge management goals are:

- All wildland fire will be managed in a safe and efficient manner, utilizing the best practical method that will produce the least negative impact on the environment and adjacent private property. The refuge staff of 14 fire management personnel maintains almost three million dollars worth of equipment to accomplish prescribed and wildfire management projects. Refuge fire management plans and step-up plans dictate the level of readiness to be maintained throughout the year.
- Dormant (winter) and growing (summer) season prescribed fire will be used to reduce hazard level of existing fuels and to restore fire dependent, grassy fuel types where brush types now exist. The fire staff burns an average of 40 to 45 burning units totaling 12,000 to 15,000 acres per year.
- Develop cooperative ventures with adjacent landowners to aid in management of swamp perimeter fires. Most cooperative ventures will be accomplished through the 80 member GOAL organization representing 20 major landowners surrounding the Okefenokee Swamp.
- Replace historic fire seasons and frequencies with prescribed fire to restore and maintain longleaf pine community habitats throughout refuge uplands.
- Restore habitat diversity throughout refuge wetlands making use of prescribed and natural fire as it occurs, using fire use guidelines.
- The refuge hosts a 12 month contract based at Pogo Helibase. Three Refuges and one National Forest share the helicopter.
- The major uses of the helicopter are prescribe burning, wildland fire management, wildlife surveys and search and rescue.
- Continue developing a fuel management zone around the perimeter of the swamp to allow more natural control of fire within the swamp.